

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Dr. Carolyn Comans: The Yin and Yang of the Professional and Personal Life

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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When Sister Mary Angelina asked her fifth grade class to prepare an illustrated story to describe their future career ambitions, Lyn Foster chose animals. *"All I could draw were cocker spaniels and horse heads, so I said that I would like to be a veterinarian."*¹

When the nun unequivocally reported that women couldn't become veterinarians *"the gauntlet was down."* From that moment on, Lyn worked toward the goal of becoming a veterinarian. During her 50th reunion in June 2010, she proudly reminisced, *"I could have been a secretary, a teacher, maybe an MD, but I got to be a veterinarian. It's great."*



Dr. Carolyn F. Comans, 50th Reunion, Class of 1960
Photo by the author

During her second year of undergraduate studies at D'Youville College in Buffalo, Lyn appeared before Cornell's Admission Committee in 1956. Like other women of the period, she was asked if she could sew and, more specifically, if she had made the dress that she wore for the interview. *"Yes! Yes, I did!"* she proclaimed proudly, explaining that the dress had been made from the patterned cotton of feed sacks that were meant to be redeployed for domestic use. She was accepted



Carolyn F. Comans, Graduation Photo, 1960
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Lyn was born in the small town of Olean in western New York and grew up in nearby Randolph. Her parents, both of whom were in the health care field, raised their two children in a supportive environment where going to college was just expected. As her father—a medic who would have been a physician except for the Depression—was driving Lyn to Ithaca to start veterinary college, he pointed from across Cayuga Lake to Cornell’s distinctive bell tower and pronounced, *“That’s your future!”*

In Lyn’s words Cornell was special because, unlike many other outstanding universities in those days, it accepted women. In fact, there were four women in her class representing the largest female enrollment in many years. Because construction of the new veterinary college campus was behind schedule, the 60 first-year students—ten more than had been admitted in previous years—were compressed into the old veterinary building for the freshman course in veterinary anatomy.

Locker facilities were unavailable for women, so Lynn and her female classmates either had to post a guard and temporarily use the men’s bathroom, or cross the street to the Statler Hotel bathroom, to change out of their formaldehyde-impregnated dissection clothing.

Despite restrictions for women that would seem archaic today—one Ambulatory professor, for example, announced that neither *“girls nor Jews”* would be allowed on farm calls with him—Lyn made the most of her relationships with both faculty and fellow students, and graduated proudly on schedule in 1960.

She practiced initially in Buffalo and then married a veterinarian from the class before her. They moved to Long Island and established the St. James Animal Hospital in Suffolk County. Lyn and her husband, Edmond Comans, owned and operated the small animal hospital for over 40 years, ultimately selling it in 2001 when they relocated to central Florida.

Dr. Comans never let herself become boxed in, always seeking new professional adventures, whether it was developing one of the first avian services on Long Island in the early 1970s, or developing an acupuncture practice after they relocated to central Florida.

“Her wonderful ability to work with clients, to wisely explain appropriate medical options under the most challenging situations, is one of her great attributes,” her husband and St. James Hospital partner remarked during her recent Cornell reunion. *“She is just a superb veterinarian.”*

Though she entered the profession at a period when women veterinarians were starting to grow in numbers and influence, Dr. Comans chose not to align herself with the Association for Women Veterinarians. She felt that her influence and impact should be as a veterinarian, without being in a cohort defined by some *“accident of birth.”*

Dr. Comans glows when she describes how she loves being a veterinarian in clinical practice, and how fitting family and professional life worked for her.

I’m not going to say every single morning I was happy to get up and go to work, but overall, I just loved it. It was different every day. It was creative.

I have four kids, three adopted children and one genetic child. What I would say is, you can’t have everything, and my choice was not to have a clean house. My children all had a college education and are all pursuing something in their lives. They were a great joy, a great joy! I just cannot say enough about my family life, which was a wonderful blessing. You know it sustained me many times when I was ready to say, ‘Ah fooley’ on this whole thing.

And the other way around, my professional life sustained me with my family life. So it’s just yin and yang. I was very, very fortunate. There is nothing but good fortune in my life, really.

¹ Comans, Carolyn F. Interview with Donald F. Smith and Jennifer K. Morrissey (Cornell University), 2010 Jun 11. All quotes in this story are from this interview. <http://hdl.handle.net/1813/17032>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.